

Irony-Free Zone

Rachel Hadas

The Unthroned Oracle: A Study of the Poetry of Laura Riding

by Jack Blakemore

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George Lakoff observed recently that a fundamental error of the Democrats during the 2016 Presidential campaign was their reliance on repeating Donald Trump's words, as if his own language would damn him. The technique backfired; his message, if that's the word, was driven home again and again.

A somewhat similar problem pertains to any attempt at critical discussion of the work of Laura Riding. As if it were a useful analytical tool, critics often quote Riding's prose at length (she's a lot wordier than Trump; it would be hard to imagine Riding tweeting). Their intention is unclear. Is it to persuade, to clarify, or to hold her up to ridicule? Riding's rebarbative language, inspissated idiom, and convoluted logic seem to twist in the hands of the critics and redound on them. We may be amused or confused; we're not enlightened.

The poetry isn't much easier, but it is limpid by comparison – crabbed, hermetic, but sometimes lovely. The moment you turn to Riding's prose about her own poetry, or about poetry in general, any sense of clarity or calm appreciation goes out the window. John Ashbery, whose charming essay on Riding in his collected Norton lectures, *Other Traditions*, is by far the best piece on Riding that I've read (which admittedly isn't saying much), comments that

her poetry, hedged about with caveats of every sort in the form of admonitory prefaces and postscripts, presents us with something like a minefield; one reads it always with a sensation of sirens and flashing red lights in the background.

What then are we to do with a body of poetry whose author warns us that we have very little chance of understanding it, and who believes that poetry itself is a lie?

Ashbery, who enjoys Riding's poetry, blithely suggests that we misread it, which we inevitably will anyway. Ashbery wisely spends more time on Riding's poetry than on her prose; when he quotes the latter (which I will try not to do), there's more than a whiff of irony in the air.

But Jack Blackmore's *The Unthroned Oracle* is an irony-free zone. Blackmore writes as a partisan, a defender of Riding's poetry who also has frequent recourse to precisely those prefaces and postscripts that set off alarm bells for a more urbane critic. And when Blackmore attempts close readings, to which much of the book is devoted, he alternates between counting end-rhymes and assonances and issuing statements that recall Riding in their baffling opacity: 'This attention to parallelisms within the poem is a method of paying attention to what the poet is saying, as opposed to what you as the reader intend to read.'

The striking quality of Riding's idiosyncratic poetry at its best is its original quality – sometimes abstract, always hermetic. Resistant to many critical approaches in the first place, this poetry is only made murkier if we attempt to apply Riding's precepts to it. And yet students of Riding's work will want to read this earnest study, which has a rich bibliography and which ends with some memorable descriptions by Mark Jacobs of a visit to Riding in Wabasso, the Florida town where Riding lived from 1941 until her death in 1991. I'll end with an anecdote which (like those hapless Democrats Lakoff describes) I assume, probably mistakenly, speaks for itself.

The next morning Laura was reading a book which I saw was Susan Sontag's *On Photography*. 'Sontag?' I queried. She nodded. 'Yes. I'm trying to find whether she took anything from my own essays on photography.'

Rachel Hadas is a poet, essayist, teacher and translator. Recent books include *Questions in the Vestibule* (2016), *Strange Relation* (2011), *The Golden Road* (2012), *Talking to the Dead* (2015). She is co-editor of *The Greek Poets: Homer to the Present* (2010) and currently working on verse translations of Euripides' Iphigenia plays, forthcoming in 2018. Hadas also collaborates with her husband, Shalom Gorewitz, a video artist, on kinetic works combining images and poetry. She is a Board of Governors Professor at Rutgers University, Newark.